BOOKS

The past comes to life in Parade

It is summer, 1939 — golden, drowsy days in Toronto, with the hint of European war on the horizon but no one very agitated about the prospect.

Toronto writer Margaret Drury Gane's hero in *Parade on an Empty Street* — her first novel — is 11-year-old Keith Gillies, whose father sells silverware at Eaton's, and whose mother delights in making preserves and playing the piano.

Life is pretty serene for Keith until two events change it — the arrival of a mysterious young girl next door, and a visit from his mother's former beau.

Other people's nostalgia is a precarious thing. The writer who delves into his or her past must be able to make it real enough — and interesting enough — that we can all share in the reminiscences.

Gane, who was born and raised in Toronto of immigrant English parents, has a simple, evocative style, laced with humor, that makes her memories fresh and appealing.

The story is larded with descriptions of Saturday afternoon movies, complete with Movietone newsreels and Wild Bill Hickok serials; horse-drawn baker's wagons; Tom Swift adventure novels; the *Evening Telegram*; Vi-Tone; The Shadow; pinups of Lana Turner; the Ex with *free* samples; and the hard-to-imagine realization in today's crowded metropolis, that for some children the world in those days virtually ended at St. Clair Avenue.

The novel opens with Keith, a divorced, middle-aged dentist, catching a glimpse in his lawyer's reception room, of Shirley Upshaw, the mystery girl who haunted his youth.

Hard-to-imagine

Nothing much exciting has happened in the young Keith's life until Shirley's arrival, although it is idyllic enough. The Gillies children find it hard to imagine the Depression 10 years earlier that their father occasionally talks about — men selling apples on street corners, lined up at soup kitchens after waiting all day in front of Massey-Harris, hoping for a job — "women of the streets selling themselves for a nickel."

In the summer of 1931, they even turned off the water because the bill wasn't paid, Keith is told. "It was a story that never ceased to excite me — adventure, privation, my mother's cool presence of mind. Under the eyes of curious neighbors, she had walked across the grass 'oward the hydro man. . .and had smiled warmly as ugh his visit was not only expected but welcome. 'Oh!' she had said with satisfaction, pleased as punch, 'That's so much better! Thank you. The tap has stopped dripping.'"

Keith's adventures begin when the orphaned Shirley Upshaw moves next door to live with her grandmother and only relative. The girl goes to Keith's school but keeps aloof and apart from the other children, and is kept from contact after school by her witch-like guardian.

— edwina frankford

MARGARET DRURY DANE: A winner first time out.

YVONNE CRITTENDEN

Books Editor

Meanwhile, mother's old boyfriend Durham comes for an extended visit with the family. The boy surprises them embracing when he comes home unexpectedly from school.

Keith wants to hate Durham, knowing he threatens the family, and his own sense of security. But he is torn, since the man is the only adult who ever talks to him like a grownup. Strange how hard that lesson is for parents to learn, but possibly not so strange. It's difficult for them to make the transition from seeing children grow from dependent babies to wilful, independent youth.

In a child's world, the immediate always takes precedence over the remote, and although the headlines blare war news, Keith is more concerned about what is happening at home.

His attempts to defuse the situation are clumsy and pathetic, and he can't help seeing the comparison his dull, well-meaning, but plodding father and the humorous, attractive rival.

"What made it infinitely worse was the realization that deep down beneath my shabby pile of hatred, I liked Durham better than I liked my father."

Gradually, however, his fascination with the girl next door overtakes his fears about his parents.

Keith's discoveries of her tragic past coincide with the first pangs of adolescent longings for the other sex.

Real dawn of sex

"By the time six or seven weeks of Grade 8 had rolled by, we had realized that it was no ordinary year . . .we knew that we could rest, at last, at the top of the heap. . .After so many false forays, this new status brought the real dawn of sex.

"During September, we had noticed that girls we'd barely tolerated the year before had grown breasts and hips, like a bonus crop, during the warm summer months. With eyebrows newly darkened under HB pencil and Lily-of-the-Valley oiling their earlobes, they clustered in scented groups, trying to flirt. Very soon, we'd learned to get around this by staging mock fights with them, disguising our carefully placed shoves under a blanket of distracting noise.

"This was a sexuality that could be measured in decibels, something that most adults never seemed to catch on to because they mistakenly linked sex with their own secret rustling silences."

Gane is particularly adept at evoking memories of school and, although teachers and kids have not changed much, the quaint customs of dissecting poetry and 'spelling bees', for example, cause a nostalgic sigh — who is going to teach today's young the glories of English literature at an early age? And did learning to spell by rote really choke off "creativity?"

Gane also points out the awful helplessness of children, forced to conform to whatever dictates the adults in their lives insist on. Sometimes they have to be very strong to survive.

The book's women's magazine ending is a little weak, but it doesn't really spoil the enchanted portrait Gane gives us of childhood and a simpler world. **(Clarke Irwin; $10.95)**